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Second Soviet Missile Mishap Is Reported by U.S. Officials

By MICHAEL R. GORDON
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 17— A new long-range Soviet missile exploded during a test flight last month, Reagan Administration experts said today.

They said they believed the failure was a setback for the Soviet missile program.

The explosion, they said, occurred during the second test flight of the missile. The first flight, in April, also ended in failure when the missile exploded soon after leaving a silo, according to intelligence reports.

The missile is a new version of the heavy SS-18. The present model is deemed to be the most accurate in the Soviet arsenal and able to carry a greater payload than other Soviet missiles.

Unrelated to Other Accident

The SS-18 failure preceded the misfiring this month of a SS-N-8 submarine-launched missile that is believed to have landed in Manchuria.

Stephen M. Meyer, an expert of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said:

"The SS-18 is probably the most capable strategic weapon in the Soviet inventory in terms of its ability to destroy hardened targets in the United States, such as missile silos and command and control facilities.

"Developing a follow-on to the SS-18 is a central part of their strategic planning for the 1990's."

Another expert, who asked not to be identified, said the existing and new versions of the SS-18 can carry a large number of warheads that could be used to try to overwhelm defenses. The present version is believed by most experts to be capable of carrying 10 warheads.

Experts familiar with intelligence reports said that the new version exploded in midflight, perhaps as the first stage finished firing or when the second stage ignited.

The general view is that the setback

will delay the program, but that the Soviet Union will eventually overcome the problems.

Experts said that the Soviet Union could drop its plans to improve some features of the SS-18 and revert to the original design.

Nonetheless, the disclosure about the test failure comes in the aftermath of other reports about setbacks in the Soviet missile test program.

The Soviet Union has also experienced problems in its effort to develop the 10-warhead SS-24. This missile is still under development and is to be deployed later this year, according to the Pentagon. The Pentagon says that the

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missile is to be based in silos and on rail cars.

Administration officials said that the efforts to develop the SS-24 have not been very successful and that the current version will not present a threat to American missile silos.

This is because the missile is not sufficiently accurate and because its payload capability is limited. The warheads that it is capable of carrying would be the lightest, and least potent, in the Soviet land-based missile arsenal, according to intelligence reports. The unarmed SSS-N-8 submarine-

launched missile that appears to have gone astray in Manchuria would have been more than 1,500 miles off course. It is an older system, and more modern submarine-based missiles have since been developed by the Soviet Union. Officials said today that the remains of the missile have not yet been found.

In contrast to recent Soviet tests, flight tests of the new American land-based missile, the MX, have been successful. Problems cropped up in the past with other American missiles, including the Pershing 2 and the Tomahawk cruise missile. In 1983, a Defense Department official said the Navy's Trident ballistic missiles had failed

operational tests.

The unratified 1979 strategic arms limitation treaty, which President Reagan has said the United States intends to stop observing, blocks the development of new types of heavy missiles. However, it allows the development of new versions of the existing SS-18.

Because of limited intelligence information about the new missile, the United States has no basis to question Soviet assertions that the development of the missile is consistent with the treaty.

The United States is now seeking limits on heavy missiles in the Geneva arms talks. Its new proposal on long-

range arms, which has been approved by President Reagan, would set a limit of 1,650 on the number of warheads that can be carried on heavy missiles, missiles with more than six warheads and mobile missiles, if the Soviet Union can convince the United States that such missiles can be effectively verified.

The Soviet Union's current force of 308 SS-18 missiles carries more than 3,000 warheads. The SS-24 would also be subject to this limit since it carries 10 warheads, as would the mobile single-warhead SS-25, which has already been deployed. Thus, the American proposal would confront the Soviet Union with difficult choices and would force reductions in heavy missiles and other land-based missiles.

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Soviet Acknowledges Explosion of a Missile

Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Sept. 18 — A Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman acknowledged today that a missile exploded during a test flight last month, but he gave no details other than that it "did not clear the Soviet border."

Answering questions at a news briefing, the spokesman, Boris D. Pyadyshhev, said, "I can only say such a fact indeed took place." He said the missile had been launched in a "regular exercise."

It is unusual for the Soviet Union to confirm military mishaps of this kind, and the statement on the missile may reflect Mikhail S. Gorbachev's more open information policy.

According to a report from Washington, Government officials said that a new version of the heavy SS-18 long-range missile exploded in midflight during a test last month. A first test flight, in April, reportedly also ended in failure when the missile exploded soon after leaving its silo.

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